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THE NEUTRALITY OF SWITZERLAND.¹

PLEASANT A. STOVALL,
Ex-Minister to Switzerland.

One of the first troubles which Switzerland encountered at the opening of the European War was the appearance over its territory of the aeroplanes of belligerents. Switzerland was soon called upon to complain of this violation of her neutrality and several towns suffered serious damage from bombs which were dropped by accident or design. One of the first offenders was an English aviator who, starting at Bellfort near the Swiss border, dropped shells over the German sheds at Frederickshafen where Zeppelin raiders were being manufactured. It was shown that the British airman had actually flown above a section of Switzerland. The matter was promptly taken up by the Swiss Federal Council and the English Government was swift to make an apology. If the aeroplane had actually passed over any part of Switzerland it was an inadvertence. Still, Great Britain added that the question had not been definitely settled, and, although anxious to respect Switzerland's wishes in every way possible, the United Kingdom had not admitted the right of any country to claim sovereignty over all the air resting above it.

Germany was a frequent offender in this respect. Repeatedly her aviators were accused of unlawful incursion and as often did they apologize. But, no more than England, did Germany admit the justice of Switzerland's contention. It claimed that even a warship was allowed to remain for a while in foreign waters without violating neutrality. So Berlin contended an aeroplane which merely passed over a country might do so without arousing suspicion of abusing neutral rights.

¹ This address was delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of the University of Georgia, June 19, 1922.

These opening incidents show how carefully Switzerland regarded its neutrality in the war. Indeed, one of the miracles of the World's War was the neutrality of Switzerland.

No nation was more affected by the war, although it was not actually one of the belligerents. As a government it carefully abstained from showing sympathy for either side. It has no story of towns destroyed or of armies annihilated. And yet, first and last, Switzerland was in turmoil and was a real sufferer from the struggle.

The picture of the little country during the four years was pathetic. It was surrounded on all sides by a wall of fire. On the north and east Germany and Austria bordered, and and on the west and south France and Italy were its close neighbors. It was dependent absolutely upon both groups for supplies, because Switzerland was far from being self-sustaining. From Germany and Austria it drew iron, steel, coal, sugar and commercial fertilizers. Through the Allied lines it was compelled to bring grain and the bulk of its produce and provisions.

The most dependent country in the world, Switzerland always insisted upon its neutrality and independence. For one hundred years this neutrality had been guaranteed by peace congresses of the European Powers. It was established by the spirit of the people themselves. This little republic offered a tempting theatre to nations at war. It separated the ancestral foes, Germany and France. As the first Napoleon said, it was the most valuable avenue of attack and defense between these two countries.

In the early part of its history Switzerland was always more or less embroiled. It had resisted the encroachments of the House of Hapsburg until the latter had been beaten to silence. It had hurled back the armies of Burgundy, had blocked the ambition even of Charles the Bold and retired the claims of the House of Savoy. Switzerland had remained neutral in the Thirty Years War. However, it was more or less involved in the Napoleonic Wars for its soil was repeatedly invaded by the Allies.

By the treaty of 1815, however, the neutrality and independence of Switzerland were recognized and guaranteed by the nations of Europe. In the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 Switzerland preserved her neutrality and a French army retreating from Bellfort fell back into Switzerland and was interned at Neuchatel. Eighty thousand men were disarmed and imprisoned in Switzerland until the war was completed.

Careful convoys of scouts watched the belligerents from towers on the frontier in 1914. When American soldiers arrived in large numbers in France three years later Switzerland promptly sounded President Wilson as to the policy of adding American recognition to European guarantees of its neutrality. And when she was invited later on to enter the League of Nations a commission was dispatched to Paris to explain to the Peace Conference that Switzerland could not under her contract with Europe assist in an economic blockade or authorize the passage of troops across her soil, even though the latter might be sent by the League of Nations to punish refractory states.

The wonder of the war was that in the midst of the turbulent scenes taking place in Europe, the effusion of blood and the shortage of food, Switzerland had preserved its neutrality and stood out against force and temptation. High authorities asserted at home and abroad that the time had come for the little nations to seek protection of the large countries or to form their own alliance for combined defense. Switzerland, in spite of her temptation to cast her lot on either side, remained steadfastly asserting its neutrality, becoming the admiration of the world.

It had long been a favorite plan with writers and strategists to erect Switzerland, Alsace-Lorraine, Luxemburg, and Belgium into a "federated block of neutral territory." Did King Albert have this in his head when he appealed to the little states to stand together in the shadow of the impending storm? His words were significant. But in thirty days the storm which he feared had broken and the landmarks of Europe were brushed aside in a single night. The visit of the King of Belgium to Berne, the capital of Switzer-

land, took place only three weeks before the European War burst upon the world. He had been in the habit of making unofficial visits to the Alps, lingering at the lakeside and enjoying the beautiful scenery of the Riviera of Switzerland. This time he threw off his incognito and was received in royal style at the federal capital. The Belgian colors floated from every eminence. It was believed he came to make a plea for a league of little peoples. If so, Switzerland turned a deaf ear to his entreaties. The country declined to express its sympathy for Belgium when Germany had actually violated the neutrality of that nation.

The guarantee of the independence of Switzerland cannot serve as a pretext to the great powers to exercise a control upon the politics of that country. It does not prevent her from organizing and from training the largest army possible. Some Swiss writers affect to see in this guaranteed neutrality a cause of feebleness to Switzerland in limiting its liberty of action. They contend that a recognition of her neutrality is sufficient and that a guarantee itself is without value. But Switzerland claims to have experienced its benefits, recognized by treaties and supported by its army. It is not a neutrality imposed by the other powers, as in the case of Belgium, but recognized and guaranteed.

No one knew how close Switzerland came to be the Belgium of the war. Two years before the war opened the German Kaiser paid a visit to that country during the summer military manoeuvres. He came to study the Swiss Army and to spy out the country. He was especially struck with the evidence of marksmanship among the men.

The Kaiser is said to have approached one of the recruits on the rifle range and to have congratulated him upon his skill. "But do all the men in the Swiss Army shoot as well as you do?" the Emperor asked.

"Yes, Sire," answered the soldier, "there are two hundred and fifty thousand men in the Swiss Army who shoot just as well as I do."

The artist who recalled this picture and who framed it in a cartoon during the European War, represented the Kaiser

as placing his hand upon his nose and muttering to himself, "I expect when the time comes it will be better for me to go through Belgium."

Whether this anecdote is a creation of art or a repetition of history, it is true that Germany realized that it could not easily flank the armies of France by parading through the mountains of Switzerland.

In the beginning of the year 1917 the German General Staff among several projects examined a plan to strike the Allies on the Western front, violating Swiss neutrality. It is declared on good authority that this last manoeuvre had been absolutely decided upon; that it was to form the complement of the plan carried out in Belgium at the opening of the hostilities. The violation of Switzerland was expected to permit the outflanking and capture of defensive positions organized in France. The German Staff was already looking forward to a struggle in the rear of the French Army as a prelude to final triumph. Hindenberg is said to have been fascinated by the probable result of the Swiss manoeuvre. He abandoned the idea of trying to end the war in the Near East and reinforced his Western front to the utmost.

In spite of the fact that the Great Powers had expressly in 1815 recognized the neutrality and inviolability of Switzerland, which, they said, was in the interest of the whole of Europe, after all the resistance of the neutral state is the essential factor. This was the opinion of von Moltke. The aid of a foreign power, he intimated, would be proportionate to the interests of that power.

It will thus be seen that the Swiss did not rest their neutrality entirely upon the good will of the surrounding powers. Added to the natural physical barriers to invasion from any quarter, Switzerland's neutrality is respected for the reason that her people are united and that they could mobilize an army of nearly half a million men on any border. No one doubts that if Switzerland had been weak in a military sense as Belgium and Luxemburg were weak, Germany would not have hesitated to invade her.

One of the most galling things to Switzerland was the establishment of a blockade in 1915 which the United States joined two years later. There was established *La Société Suisse de Surveillance* which had charge under Allied supervision of all articles purchased by Switzerland, to prevent their diversion into Germany. The Allies showed a generous disposition to supply Switzerland with the necessities of life, provided none of them were sent to the enemy across the Rhine. Switzerland was obliged to accept this condition, but some of her people considered it a limitation of her independence, as their country was not supposed to enter into any political or economic compact. Strong letters of dissent proceeded from the army, protesting against the blockade and declaring that Switzerland, which should remain neutral and independent, was now compelled to negotiate with one set of powers against the other. Switzerland, they charged, was submitting to dictation, her boasted neutrality had degenerated into voluntary mutilation of the state. A part of the army was ready to rebuke this evidence of cowardice, this appalling decadence of the old Swiss spirit.

So Switzerland could complain that, although its frontier was not yet menaced, still its industry was stopped; its right to live was challenged; it was cut off from earning its livelihood. Economic trouble was more deadly than cannon for a brave people. In the blockade the independence of Switzerland was more difficult to defend. She was wounded in her sorest point, her neutrality and independence, and her right to trade where and with whom she pleased.

The sympathy of Switzerland, or a majority of Switzerland, was with Germany in the European War without a doubt. Three-fourths of the country was German. What was true of the city of Basel was true of all of German Switzerland. This stately city with an ancient university that honored the memory of Erasmus; with its art galleries keeping green the tradition of Holbein; this city adhered to its belief in final German victory.

The sounds of war were plainly heard in Basel. Often the grinding of heavy artillery could be detected from the

valley where the Germans were trying to pound a rift in the French line in the Vosges Mountains. Buildings in Basel would rattle and now and then a flying machine would dot the horizon across the border dodging the white flakes which burst and spread, representing bombs thrown up from the guns which were trained upon the slow moving ships in the air.

The handsome bridges over the river were picketed. The beautiful Holbein pictures in the museum were carried away for safe keeping and a stray ray from a German search light would break out from the deep blue of the Alsatian Mountains. At Altkirch the guns pealed day and night, sometimes reaching the maximum at midnight. All this could be plainly detected in the Swiss city on the Rhine. German soldiers walked the streets as internes, but they could look across the river at German hills and enjoy the confidence that soon they would be at home with their victorious army. The bankers, clergy, university professors, doctors and lawyers, capitalists and heads of the police department were mainly pro-German.

The sympathies of French Switzerland, of course, were with the Allies. And yet, in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 the sympathies of the German Swiss were hostile to Prussia, while French Switzerland was ardently pro-German. The expression of many papers in German Switzerland, which were frankly favorable to France, provoked a protest from German papers across the Rhine. The truth is that the little republic of Switzerland did not then wish to be absorbed or influenced in any way by the overweening power of the nations on her frontier. When France was strong and dangerous the French Swiss, of course, were the first to be aware of it and the first to feel the danger. For the same reason the German Swiss at first resented the penetration of Prussia. What the German Swiss feared in 1870 had really come about in 1914. Germany had pushed its influence and its culture far into Switzerland. It had thrown its business enterprises across the Rhine; it had invested its money in Swiss banks and Swiss factories. It had

sent its professors to instruct the youth in every city. Indeed, a large part of Switzerland had already succumbed to German influence. So French Switzerland now recognized that it was Germany and not France it had to fear. For the same reason that they were suspicious of France in 1870 they were more distrustful of Germany in 1914. The significant fact was in entire opposition to race ties in 1870, and just the opposite of the situation in 1914.

Naturally there was great interest in Switzerland over the formation of the League of Nations provided for in the peace pact at Paris.

In December, 1919, the entrance of Switzerland into the League of Nations was affirmed by two-thirds majority in Parliament and in the final referendum before the people this decision was ratified by a decided vote.

Switzerland said that the Pact of Paris was not an ideal society, even though guarantees had been offered to that country. Yet she hoped by going in to perfect it, to render it more universal, more liberal and more hostile to future wars. It was not exactly what she wished but it was a step in the right direction. The majority of the people concluded that Switzerland could not remain outside of a society of nations without peril. If she refused to adhere to it the country would remain isolated in Europe, would have to support a large army; would be compelled to renounce the guarantee of neutrality offered by the great powers in 1815. It would be to place an obstacle in the way of humanity. It was not only ratified by two-thirds of the Parliament, but the treaty was referred to the people. The majority of the cantons where German is spoken were naturally suspicious of a treaty made in Paris and whose headquarters were in Geneva, the metropolis of French Switzerland. The Socialists opposed it because they feared it would permanently block their movement against the capitalists. However, in a vote of nearly 740,000 the majority in favor of the League was 90,000. German Switzerland gave an adverse majority. In French and Italian Switzerland the favorable vote was six to one. But the choice of the cantons was close. The

League was carried by a vote of thirteen to twelve, for in a referendum a popular majority and a majority of the cantons both are necessary. So, Switzerland, the birthplace of the Red Cross, had succeeded for generations, in spite of her people, diverse in race, language and religion, in realizing a society of nations in miniature. It seemed to have logically carried out the complex and delicate international organism which exemplified the highest justice among men and governments. In no land could there be found traditions and usages better suited to the ideals of the Treaty of Versailles. The selection of Geneva as a site was a happy one.

In the Hotel de Ville, Geneva, is Alabama Hall. Here the first convention of the Red Cross was signed. On a tablet one reads: "In this Hall, on the 22nd of August, 1864, the Convention at Geneva securing the amelioration of the condition of wounded soldiers on the battlefield, was concluded and signed." There is an oil painting showing the representatives of the Powers at the moment of the signing of this famous treaty. It was here, too, that the historic award was concluded which put an end, by arbitration, to the conflict between the United States and Great Britain. On a second tablet one reads: "In this Hall on the 14th of September, 1872, the Arbitration Tribunal constituted according to the treaty of Washington, pronounced on the Alabama claims, thus settling, by peaceful means, the differences between the United States and Great Britain."

Switzerland, which formed a union of all nationalities, entertained the hope of uniting the nations of the world. It longed to play an international role in the rapprochement of Europe. They saw a superb mission which their little country could fill, a mission eminently pacific, based upon the confidence which all nations felt in them. So when Geneva was chosen, through the influence of President Wilson, as the home and headquarters of the League of Nations, there was general rejoicing in the Alpine Republic. The great question received a strong impetus in the world when the favorable verdict of Switzerland was recorded. This coun-

try is the birthplace of the International Postal Union, organized in 1874 in Berne, and is the headquarters of several international agreements.

Much interest was developed in Switzerland when it was found that President Wilson was really coming to Paris and would assist in the proceedings of the Peace Conference.

If there was one man in the world who had won the admiration and the confidence of the Swiss people, that man was the President of the United States. They had followed with approbation his course throughout the war. While he was a neutral they had promptly and enthusiastically endorsed his peace message addressed to the belligerents in December, 1916. Although they had refused all overtures from peace societies and pacifists in Germany to use their good offices in any way, the Government at Berne rushed to the side of President Wilson when he issued his famous peace offer during the Christmas season.

In May, 1917, Switzerland asked Germany to give safe conduct to ships leaving America laden with wheat for Switzerland. Though without a seacoast or a ship, Switzerland, we are told, had recognized rights on the sea as a neutral nation; the Treaty of Paris of 1856 respecting neutral flags, neutral goods on vessels of belligerents and blockade was also entered into by the Swiss Government in the same year.

Irritated, however,¹ by the blockade of the Allies and piqued probably because Switzerland had to depend upon the Allies for food, Germany hesitated. Berlin explained that the necessary orders could not at once be delivered to German submarine commanders to spare the wheat ships. The submarines were scattered all over the seas and vessels from America with food for Switzerland would run the ordinary risk for three months of being torpedoed.

As soon as the Government in Washington was informed of this situation by the American Legation in Berne, Washington responded by a "*beau geste*" which, according to the *Journal de Genève*, was altogether worthy of President Wilson; for the provisioning of Switzerland was assured in spite of Germany.

"Very well," the United States answered, "we will assume the risk. Wheat vessels destined to the oldest of the European Republics will be convoyed by ships of war of the United States."

Already in promising Switzerland wheat without insisting upon compensation, America had shown her generosity in a time of stress and need. The United States themselves were scanty of rations.

Now, the President had boldly made this declaration in the face of his enemies. He placed in peril his own crews to protect the Swiss wheat. "He testified to a very practical sympathy for our country," said the Swiss, "and today the debt of Switzerland towards the United States has increased in proportion to the dangers which American sailors run upon the waves of the Atlantic to safeguard our interests."

The gratitude of the people was manifestly excited by this generous assurance authorized by the Department of State, and a beautiful silver medal was struck off in Switzerland in honor of the event. On one side *en bas relief* was the figure of a dove flying across the ocean with a sheaf of wheat. Above the dove was displayed the flag of the United States fading into clouds. On the reverse side was the Swiss cross with the words:

"To the President and People of the United States of America: The gratitude of the Swiss families. 1918."

Realizing that America had called its bluff and that America's action showed off splendidly by the side of its own half-hearted tactics, the German Legation declared in print through the Swiss papers that America's promise was a grand stand play; that Germany did not intend to torpedo the Swiss ships after all.

They were not at one with President Wilson when he decided to break relations with Germany and enter the war, mainly because they feared that their food from America would be cut off. But they came to his support when they realized that America was anxious to continue to supply them as far as possible and they were struck with the vigor with which he had prosecuted the war. As the *Journal de*

Genève had said, "Although misunderstood and misrepresented during nearly three years, the President of the United States has conducted the politics of his country with an energy and clarity worthy of all admiration." The conditions he laid down for the Armistice stamped him as a broad, liberal man. People spoke of Woodrow Wilson with reverence.

Accordingly, the Swiss Parliament, desiring to recognize the great value of American aid during the war and to honor the head of the American nation, addressed a message of welcome on the twelfth of December, 1918, to President Wilson coming to participate in the negotiations of the Treaty of Peace.

The city and canton of Geneva forwarded him a special invitation to visit that city which had been the cradle of the Red Cross and which was to be the seat of the League of Nations.

The consistory of the Cathedral of St. Pierre where Calvin preached besought him by the faith of his fathers to pay a visit to that historic place. Numerous private letters were received from Swiss peasants extolling the President of the United States for his great work and begging him even to come to their humble home. One of the most affecting tributes was paid by a local painter who had never seen the President, but who arranged a composite of his photographs. From these he painted a life sized portrait which was beautifully framed and which he requested to be forwarded to Brest, there to hang in the Grand Salon of the President's steamship, *George Washington*.

The President of the Swiss Republic went to Paris to meet President Wilson and was gratified beyond measure at his reception. He found the latter sympathetic with the peculiar situation of Switzerland, a country whose neutrality had been guaranteed and whose status was largely dependent upon its neighbors. They were particularly obligated to him for his influence in settling upon Geneva as the home of the League of Nations, and a touching telegram was indited by the Swiss delegation of the World's Peace

Congress in Geneva in December 1920, extending warm greetings to President Wilson in his sick room at Washington.

At the arsenal in Solothurn there is a striking representation upon which the Swiss delight to look. The subject is the Diet of Stans where the Swiss confederates met after their victory over Charles of Burgundy in 1481. The object of the meeting was to reach an agreement as to division of the spoils after that remarkable triumph. History says that the conference was not successful at first and the Swiss confederates were about to break up in disagreement and disorder when "Brother Klaus," a venerable monk, appeared and besought the allies to resume their work in amity. He intervened at the psychological moment; the conference was resumed; an agreement perfected and the delegates parted in peace. Everything depended on common agreement and good will. The promise of mutual aid and assistance was renewed, especially when one member attacked another. There were memorials in Switzerland to the work of the great peacemaker whose example has thrilled his country for generations, and so Switzerland regarded the coming of Woodrow Wilson to Paris as a repetition of the mission of St. Nikolaus von der Flue.

One of the features in the Treaty of Stans was that no one in the confederation should make secret treaties or encourage dangerous agitation. "Open covenants openly arrived at" were established and those of the confederation who violated this condition were to be punished according to their fault. To familiarize the rising generation with the league which bound the several states together, it was agreed that it should be sworn to every five years. All the cantons obliged themselves to succor one another in the support of the form of government then established in each of them. In fact, the history of Switzerland affords frequent instances of mutual aid for these purposes. This seems to be confirmation of the principle of Article X of the League of Nations adopted over four hundred years later, by which the parties to the agreement undertook to respect

and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all members of the League. So Switzerland, in endorsing the League of Nations in 1919, was really returning to first principles. In consequence of the intervention of the hermit priest the Diet of Stans was not fruitless, for the commissioners resumed their labors and brought them to a successful termination by drawing up the memorable covenant. The excited delegates were persuaded to listen to the words of reconciliation and peace as uttered by Brother Klaus.

No wonder that the great Nickolaus von der Flue has been handed down on the artist's canvas and in historic statuary. Chapels have been erected in his name and poems have been written. But better than all, his principles have been perpetuated. The priest's charter was affirmed when Switzerland ratified the League of Nations in December, 1919. Switzerland registered again the voice of the Diet of Stans. It was the call of Unterwalden to Versailles.

Switzerland was to find the echo centuries later when the storm which swept the world had slept.

"And Jura answers through her misty shroud
Back to the joyous Alps, which call to her aloud."